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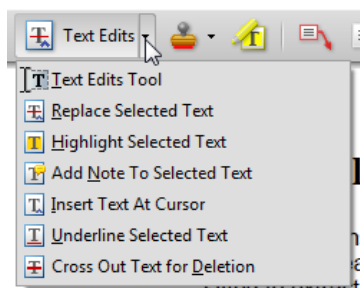
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BOOK REVIEW

Researching the recognition of prior learning: international perspectives, edited by Judy Harris, Mignonne Brier and Christine Wihak, Leicester, National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (England and Wales), 2011, 344 pp., £24.95, ISBN 978-1-

AQ1 86201-460-2

This book is not for the fainthearted. If you require a text which gives you a comparative perspective on the degrees of uptake and embeddedness of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in six Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member national higher education systems, this is the right compendium. It is also for those who labour at the coal face of further or higher education, mining the often latticed seams of ‘adult education’, ‘prior learning’, ‘non-formal and informal learning’ and ‘experiential learning’. There are of course elective affinities between these and other themes in the book, including ‘lifelong’, ‘work-based’, ‘workplace’ learning and higher education policies in general, with the emphasis on the pedagogical relations between RPL and lifelong learning. The editors announce, correctly in my view, that ‘the field of RPL is emerging as a distinct area of research with its own body of scholarly literature’ (12) and that it is a ‘complex and contested’ area (11).

The hidden hand of capable and focused editing can be felt in the collection’s thematic coherence and informative analysis of the state-of-the-art research on national RPL regimes in higher education. The book is made up of a collection of contributions from the European Union (EU), OECD and six member states of the latter, including the United States (US), Australia, South Africa (SA) and Sweden. Britain is represented by two strong analytical contributions on RPL in England and Scotland. With two of the editors working in universities there, Canada merits three entries, two at federal level and a separate one for Quebec. This provides a useful academic inventory of the different national higher education regimes currently operating the design and implementation of RPL especially the ‘islands of good practice’ in the OECD illustrated in Chapter 7.

Conceived in post-World War II US as a credit transfer or exchange system for returning veterans to enter university (Chapter 11), RPL has evolved over the past 40 years or more at the core of a range of higher education strategies. RPL has been adapted and adopted by governments variously as a driver of *widening participation* and *social inclusion*, (Chapters 3, 6 and 10) as *vocational competences*, as means of upgrading and re-skilling the labour force through *workforce development* in increasingly competitive global markets, and also as an *emancipatory adult education method*, (Chapters 5, 9 and 12 have useful insights into this) linked to more generic programmes, opening an often grudging academia to consider that knowledge can indeed be created outside its hallowed walls. The latter also marked shifts towards

2 Book review

more liberal and learner-centred andragogies as opposed to didactic and teacher-driven, discipline focused transmission of knowledge. Research reported from the US in Chapter 11 shows overwhelmingly that RPL students had higher rates of completion and got better marks at completion of courses than non-RPL ones even at the same institution.

Helen Pokorny (Chapter 5) hints at the tensions between instrumentalist conceptions of RPL as enhancing and upskilling labour supplies, and its transformative variants privileging the personal self-discovery and confidence building aspects through experiential and informal learning acknowledging the legitimacy of situated or context-based learning. Those of us, like me, who have professionally engaged with work-based learning but still have to justify our academic *bona fides* to sceptical colleagues basking in their disciplines, will find Angelia Wong's (Chapter 12) evaluation of RPL 'as a social movement . . . pressing universities for institutional change to facilitate the achievement of credentials by non-traditional groups of learners' (304) particularly encouraging. She is also right in suggesting that an academic paradigm shift is required for 'faculty members to appreciate different kind of knowledge production, as well as the complexities of learning and the circumstances in which it can take place' (301).

As the spirited contribution on SA by one of the editors (Chapter 9) hints, beyond the 'clash of discourses' (the technical – market *versus* critical-radical among others) lie real issues of funding and resourcing to back up the rhetoric of equal access to a democratic and emancipatory higher education system. In one of her case studies she highlights the significance of the combination of teaching skills with pastoral skills to reshape teachers as 'masters of what Aristotle has called practical wisdom or *phronesis*, a form of knowledge and disposition that incorporates both the abstract and the particular and enables the individual to negotiate that particular in the light of a general ethical understanding' (216). There is evidence elsewhere in the book, however, that the world economic crisis is tending to reinforce the narrower and instrumentalist variants of RPL, such as cut price in-house training and continuing professional development schemes undertaken by vocationally oriented higher education institutions. In a way, this raises the issue of 'What are universities for?' in the current crisis ridden conjunctures of the global economy – but that is another topic although there are echoes of this substantive question in this useful, well researched and 'specialist appropriate' collection.

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